ITALIAN *Romantics*

BRILLIANT CLASSICS

Wolf-Ferrari

Concertante Works
Chamber Music
Piano Music

Concertante Works I

The very name of **Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari** (1876-1948) declares the dual heritage he embraced both in his music and way of life. Hermann Friedrich Wolf, as he was christened, was born on January 12 1876 and grew up in Venice, son of a German father, the Bavarian painter August Wolf, and Emilia Ferrari, a Venetian noblewoman. Despite showing a natural talent for and sensitivity to music – he could play all the Beethoven sonatas (apart from the *Hammerklavier*) by the age of twelve and was profoundly affected by the music of Wagner which he heard when visiting his aunt in Bayreuth, his father wanted him to follow his own profession as a painter and in 1891, he was sent to Rome to study at the Accademia di Bel Arti. In the spring of the following year, Hermann – as he still was - moved to Munich where for a brief period he attended the independent art school of the Hungarian Simon Holossy but having confessed to his disappointed father that his true vocation was music, enrolled at the Akademie der Tonkunst. His *Serenade in E flat* was performed by the student orchestra in 1894 and when it was published the following year, he adopted the Italianate form of his forename and added his mother's surname, to distinguish himself from other musical Wolfs of the period (notably Hugo whose *Italian Serenade* had appeared a few years previously). He left the Akademie in 1895 without graduating, having refused to sit one of the exams on the grounds that he had learned nothing from his teacher, returning to Italy, where in 1897 he became director of German choir in Milan.

He established his reputation with two large-scale choral works on biblical subjects - *La Sulamite* Op.4 (1898) and *Talita Kumi*, Op.3 (1900) but his first two opera projects came to nothing. His third attempt *Cenerentola* was staged at La Fenice in February 1900 but met with such a negative reception, the audience displaying loud displeasure at its Wagnerian chromaticisms and dramatic longueurs, that the hyper-sensitive composer left Italy with his wife - the German soprano Clara Killian whom he had married in 1898 - and young son. He spent the next three years in Germany where a revised German-language version of *Cenerentola* and the Dante cantata *La vita nuova* (Op.9) were well received. During this period he developed an entirely new operatic style, derived musically from the 18th century classicism of Mozart (married to the *parlando* style of Verdi's *Falstaff*) and dramatically from the fast-paced character comedies of the 18th century Venetian playwright Goldoni. The first of these modern *opere buffe, Le donne curiose* was premiered in Munich in 1903 and soon gained audiences elsewhere including Vienna and New York (directed by Mahler and Toscanini respectively), although it was to be some time before it appeared in Italy. In 1903 he was appointed director for life of the Venice conservatory, the Liceo Benedetto Marcello but he resigned six years later and moved back to Munich which was to be his principal place of residence for most of the rest of his life. Over the next ten years he produced five operas including an experiment in verismo style *I Gioielli della Madonna*, all of which were first performed in German theatres.

Italy's entry into the First World War against Germany in April 1915, bringing the two countries of his heritage into conflict, resulted in a personal and creative crisis and in 1916 he took refuge in Zurich, leaving his wife and child in Munich. He spent the next six years in Switzerland working intermittently on a serious "fairy tale" opera *Das Himmelskleid* which was eventually produced in Munich in 1927, but was unable to complete anything. It was only in 1925, three years after his return to Munich with his second wife, that he broke his musical silence with *Gli Amanti Sposi* which had in fact been more or less completed by 1916. It premiered in 1925 at La Fenice, scene of his humiliation twenty-five years earlier and whereas before the war, there had been scant interest in his music in Italy, four of his next five operas received their first performances there (perhaps as a result of Mussolini's active promotion of Italian culture, although Wolf-Ferrari was not himself ideologically or personally associated with the regime). In the 1930s he began to compose purely orchestral music for the first time in thirty years and from 1940 onwards, apart from a single opera *Der Kuckuck von Theben* (*Gli dei a Tebe*) produced in Hannover in 1943, wrote exclusively for instruments in various combinations including a violin concerto (Op.6). He remained in Germany and Austria throughout the Second World War – he had been appointed professor of composition at the Salzburg Mozarteum in 1939 – which occasioned a temporary reaction against his music after 1945. In 1946 he went to Zurich for a short period before returning in ill health to Venice where he died suddenly on January 21 1948. At his funeral on the island of St Michele the large crowd, perhaps in conscious imitation of Verdi's funeral, sang the final chorus from his Venetian opera *Il Campiello*.

The *Serenade in E Flat*, the first complete work by Wolf-Ferrari to survive, was first performed in 1894 at the Tonakademie under the direction of Ludwig Abel, the professor of conducting. It is an astonishingly assured piece of writing for a seventeen-year old with only a years' formal instruction in composition and while obviously indebted to past masters of the string serenade – Mozart, Dvorak, notably in the wistfully melancholic Andante, and Tchaikovsky - does not disgrace their company. Its lyrical classicism sets it apart from his other works of the 1890s which are fairly studiously conceived examples of Germanic late romanticism and so it may have been at least planned before he fell under its influence at the Munich academy, although the fugal passages of the finale were perhaps influenced by the teaching of his conservatively- minded professor Josef Rheinberger to whom the work is dedicated.

Wolf-Ferrari's conscious identification with the music of the 18th century has led to him being categorised as a "conservative" composer, and insofar as he rejected modernist theory and practice, this is an accurate description: for him tonality like perspective in art was not "a matter of opinion". And although he does not display the same ironic detachment from that period as for example, Richard Strauss in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, his "reversioning" of classicism with a 20th century perspective (almost) always avoids pastiche. The two concertinos for oboe and bassoon were written during an extended stay in Venice in 1931-2 and first performed in 1933. They represent his first purely orchestral works since the *Kammersymphonie* (Op.8) of 1903 and indicated a renewed interest in instrumental music which lasted until his death fifteen years later. The *Idillio-Concertino in A* (Op.15) is perhaps one of the most best works for oboe of the 20th century and has unfairly been eclipsed by Richard Strauss' concerto of 1946. It shows off the capabilities of the oboe as a virtuoso instrument and highlights its various moods – bright and cheerful in the syncopated *Preambola* and *Rondo* finale, naively bucolic in the *Scherzo* (with its perhaps inevitable echoes of the *Pastoral Symphony*) and melancholically introspective in the *Adagio*. The strings are augmented occasionally by two horns used sparingly to add a depth and richness to the string tone which in the *Adagio* reach an almost Mahlerian intensity. The same orchestral forces are used in the *Suite-Concertino in F* (Op.16) where the entire range of the bassoon is explored particularly its generally underused potential for *cantabile* in the romantic *Notturno*. The instrument's *buffo* character comes to the fore in the *Strimpatella* (literally "strumming") - a scherzo without a trio (although there is a brief recollection of the *Notturno* theme). The reflective mood of the opening is restored in the *Canzone* but in a more austerely classical manner which is maintained in the measured and graceful *Finale*.
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Concertante Works II

Although one often tends to think only of the emblematic example of Neoclassicism, the "presence of the past" in twentieth-century music was nonetheless a widespread and variegated phenomenon

which cannot be squeezed into convenient cubbyholes. In the heterogeneous mass of re-evaluations, re-workings and "returns to" which so strongly characterized the first half of the century, a common denominator might be found in the rejection of an imperative typical of modern art: that of adapting to the times and needs of the artistic language. In the face of this imperative, is it perhaps not paradoxical for a composer tied to the past to appear, in his own way, a rebel from the opposite camp by refusing to accept, as an unequivocal and obligatory choice, radicalism, the avant-garde, atonality, and the intense wrestling with the complex needs of compositional technique at certain moments in its evolution. In this sense, his choice is invariably identifiable (though no disrespect is intended) with a poetic language of "non-commitment".

In its simplest and most direct form, this refusal of any aesthetic obligation is well expressed by Arthur Benjamin (1893-1960). Arrigo Pedrollo (18781964) had quite a different rapport with the past. This musician from Montebello Vicentino might be included among the "celebrated generation of the 1880s" (Malipiero, Respighi, Casella, Pizzetti) for chronological reasons, but in many aspects he was a solitary figure, a typical example of the artist destined to clash with the difficult renewal of Italian music in the early twentieth century, in a conflict which pitted "the death of opera" against the attempt to revive an indigenous instrumental tradition. And it is undeniable that, aside from any questions of merit, the confines of Pedrollo's career to an academic environment may be viewed in the light of this historical dilemma.

Yet the true master of archaic imagery in early twentieth-century Italian music was Ermanno WolfFerrari, he was considered "Life's favourite son" who, because of his precocious training and Apollonian and spontaneous creative vein, must have suffered more than others from the conflicts of modernity, the fracture between past and present. The *IdillioConcertino op. 15* for oboe (1932) and the *Piccolo Concerto op. 34* for English horn (1947) are fine examples of Wolf-Ferrari's "unevolved" musical language, for both stylistic and chronological reasons. Their very titles (though not entirely appropriate to the length of the pieces) reflect the principles that distinguish the composer's poetry: freshness, references to eighteenth-century models, a spiritualized play with forms. And yet the two *Adagio* sections, (especially that of op. 34), suffice to debunk the false myth of facileness and nonchalance attached to this music.

Not a single movement fails to demonstrate the composer's meticulous care, an immediacy "to the second degree" which is the product of chiselled refinement. See, for example, the rhythmically out-of-synch canon in the Scherzo of op. 15. Behind the levity there hovers a certain graveness which can be linked to the composer's origins and Germanic training. The rejection of "*gearbeitet*", i.e., of music arising from tiresomely wrought labour, does not keep Wolf-Ferrari's writing style from being extremely contrapuntal. But in contrast to Max Reger, for example, his handling of voice-leading does not implicate greater density of harmony or texture. Instead, like in a phantasmagoric kaleidoscope, the figures intertwine and dissolve without producing compact and continuous masses of sound.

In the name of the venerated Mozart, Wolf-Ferrari strives for a constant dissimulation of complexity behind the veneer of a facile style. Perhaps, the great inventive strength of the music allows it to overcome its greatest challenge–that of reinventing a genre which, after the golden epoch of the nineteenth century, seemed destined to fade wearily away: the concerto. In this sense, the composer turns to instruments such as the oboe and the English horn, which offer a fertile "laterality" when compared to the traditions dominated by the violin and the piano. By projecting the two woodwinds into the grand sphere of solo literature, the composer receives in exchange unexpected suggestions toward a personal and novel concept of the concerto. Abandoning the heavy hand of late romanticism, Wolf-Ferrari invents a new type of virtuosity which is musically more subtle and meaningful, a different way of integrating soloist and orchestra. The instrument remains the central focus, in its individuality, its specific technical and expressive nature. But this does not stand in the way of a total interaction with the instrumental ensemble, a complete surpassing of any merely decorative element. The ability to be part of the whole, while maintaining an elevated and involved level of solo writing, harks back conceptually to the original idea of "*concertare*" which, in concordance with the etymology of the word, signifies the harmonious integration of elements that are heterogeneous among themselves.

Oboe and English horn-old voices and new ones in twentieth-century music-give to the form of the concerto a trace of looseness and freedom that is somehow also an expression of virtuosity. The composer, rather than resorting to well-honed schemes and already-tried procedures, turns instead to an inspiration which constantly renews the fantastical dialogue between the soloist and the orchestra. In opus 34, the first section of the *Capriccio* is an example of polyphony played out with a vein of bizarre and unpredictable humour, like a masked dance. It seems that for this composer, the fugal style, like any other musical device, has already been overused, and is now only acceptable if reworked and reinvented. In this thought is *Zeitlos,* that timelessness which inevitably ends up becoming synonymous with "out-of-date". Pure beauty, however, is a value that stands outside of history. The music of Wolf-Ferrari is a good demonstration of how even the 1900s-a century of earthshaking revolutions and futuristic impulses-often succeeded in evoking this idea with extraordinary power.
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The 19th and 20th century were characterized by the presence of pianists and not of violinists, but with some exceptions: composer -interpreter- violinists, from Paganini to Josef Slavik and Ole Bull, from Vieuxtemps to Wieniawski, from Sarasate to Ysaÿe ad Enescu. Since Wolf-Ferrari composed a violin Concerto, it was necessary for him to work together with a skilled violinist. There are other examples of this kind of collaborations: Ferdinand David and Felix Mendelssohn for Op.64; or Joseph Joachim and Johannes Brahms for Op.77, which was even dedicated to him and first performed by him. As to *Op.26 in D major*, the collaboration between Wolf-Ferrari and Guila Bustabo was actually even more intimate and significant. The first performance took place "at the Tonhalle of Munich on 7th January 1944, greatly conducted by professor Oswald Kabasta, and performed by Guila Bustabo as soloist, to whom I dedicated it, as a sign of my deep gratitude and my admiration for her exquisite skills."

Op.26 is peculiar, because of its duration -less than 40 minutes- the number of its movements -there are 4 instead of 3 (Brahms's second piano concerto has 4 movements)- and for its tonal style- showing Wolf-Ferrari's connection to the past. He took inspiration from the traditional romantic concerto and then renewed it. This work shows Wolf-Ferrari's keenness despite his age: he was 70, while Giulia Ferrari was 27. In Ettore Tito's portrait of Wolf-Ferrari, Guila Bustabo is represented like a mermaid. And she really was. Even if Wolf-Ferrari stated that the Concerto was "written for her, and for her only", the mermaid disappears and the Concerto becomes "too tragic" for his composer because "she, who represented her, has been taken away from me (and how much longer?)" until he "made up" that she had a disease that prevented her from playing (that was pure and desperate imagination: in 1972 in Munich, she recorded a great and impressive work with Rudolph Kempe for Bustabo Legacy). As to Wolf-Ferrari, his keenness was determined by his love for nature and his fondness for the opposite sex; and this is shown by many theatre female characters, in particular in Goldoni's comedies.

Particularly interesting is a portrait article of Guila Bustabo published on Gramophone on November 1945. In this article, Guila Bustabo described the beginning of her work, its features and told about her plans to record it (for Electrola). Unfortunately she had to give them up because of the difficult conditions of the recording industry during the war, and besides, due to a bomb attack, all the copies of her work got destroyed (bombings also destroyed the original music score of *Symphonia brevis*). According to Guila Bustabo, the Op.26 "is a classical work reminding of Mozart's stile, with a very peculiar accompaniment and a witty and lively finale." This description is rather unclear and reductive, as she herself cooperated in the composition work. As she stated in the interview for Gramophone, the work was supposed to be a brief composition (16 minutes long) but then violin and orchestra sections were added while the violin soloist played other cadences.

The final rondo is brilliant and lively and in major key. The second movement reminds of Mozart and probably this was the original 16-minute long section, even though in the final version it is only 8-9 minutes long: a Romance that reminds of Mozart's style but characterized by elements that are very far from the 18th century style. Actually the Fantasia, which is the first section, reminds of Brahms, as it is characterized by a theme with repetitions of notes and strong emotions. This theme was meant "for her and for her only" and it comes back full of expression in the final Rondò, with a brilliant and operatic style. The Finale reminds of Mendelssohn and Vieuxtemps (also the final cadence) while the Intermezzo stands for a link between Brahms and Bruch (a version of the Concerto in G minor). Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bruch and Vieuxtemps as well as Mozart. But still, in the contemporary Concertos by Korngold and Conus we can find some features typical of the 19th century and their virtuosity, due to technical rather than musical reasons, is meant for brilliant musicians such as Heifetz. As a result, what comes out in this composition is much more than the mere form and his brilliant style is totally combined with the music itself. In the 21st century, this Concerto from the historical 19th century must be played.
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(Taken from: *Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari, the music, the grace, the silence*, published by Gabrielli Editori, 2012)

Violin Sonatas

The **Sonata for violin and piano in G minor Op.1**, composed at the end of his studies at the Munich Academy (1895), is imbued with German romanticism. The Schumannian and Brahmsian atmospheres combine with a lyricism that will distinguish all Wolf-Ferrari's music. The first movement with an impetuous character (Allegro appassionato) is followed by a second one in the form of recitative (Lento, senza tempo) which continuously alternates the two instruments, and in its lyricism, combined with moments of solemnity, makes us catch a glimpse of what will be some of the main characteristics of the composer's music. In the third movement (Allegro ma non troppo e con spirito) the contrasts and fractures evoke a theatricality that will also be typical of all Wolf-Ferrari's music.

The very original **Sonata for violin and piano in A minor Op.10**, dated 1901, is in only two movements. It dates back to the second period in Munich, when after the Venetian failure of *Cenerentola* Wolf-Ferrari returned to the German city, and is contemporary of the Dante cantata for soprano, baritone, choir, orchestra, organ and piano *La vita nova* Op.9. As in the latter, severe, austere, almost religious atmospheres are breathed, in which Franck's echo is heard. The first half, *Appassionato*, is of unusually modern writing for Wolf-Ferrari. He seems to be experimenting with new solutions, looking for new languages, going beyond the typically late romantic writing that characterizes the first sonata. The second half (Recitativo. Adagio), while maintaining an almost sacred character, reaches peaks of great lyricism, once again combining the German character with the Italian one, and concludes this interesting and restless composition serene and calmly.

Further away from the first two, both temporally and musically, appears the third **Sonata for violin and piano in E major Op.27**. Composed in 1943, it is in four stages, very thematically related, and has a less passionate, more casual and sparkling character than the first two. The Allegro moderato is a time in which Wolf-Ferrari's predilection for singing and theater is perceived: pervaded by countability, it reveals many surprises, such as *fugati* or orchestral effects. In the tender Andantino, the naïve elegance and delicacy of Wolf-Ferrari clearly emerge, "a late nephew of Mozart and Cimarosa" (Giannotto Bastianelli); while the third movement (Agitato), in minor key, has a character once again passionate, as in the most youthful sonatas. The latest movement, Allegro molto con fuoco, uses the same varied theme as the first, and is also full of twists. In it, energetic and impetuous moments, fugati, recitatives, moments of reflection, alternate. It is as if Wolf-Ferrari wanted to make a synthesis of all its most typical characteristics, passion, lyricism, irony, tenderness, and theater.

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Translation: Claire Montagna and Daniela Roma

Piano Trios

Much of Wolf-Ferraris early chamber music survives only in unpublished manuscript form and without record of public performance. However in an undated letter to his old professor, Rheinberger, in which he gave news of his appointment as director of the Milan choir and his marriage, both in 1897, he mentioned a concert, which had been "an extraordinary success" among the Milanese who dubbed him a "Componista dotto! (learned composer). It included a piano trio in D (completed in 1896 although parts may have been composed earlier) of which he thought Rheinberger would approve "because it was an important step back to simplicity and beauty of form" (Einfachheit und Formschönheit) revealing that even at this early stage in his career he was contemplating the stylistic fusion of past and present that was to characterise his later music. The extensive corrections and revisions in the manuscript (most evident in the second movement) reveal how intensively he worked to achieve this end. The first movement is set out in sonata form although it is not rigorously applied, the second subject being very much subordinate to the first and more or less ignored in the recapitulation, lending a monothematic feel to the movement. The grandiose statement with which it ends recurs at the close of the finale introducing a cyclic element to the work. The second movement alternates a rustic dance complete with drones and a faster paced section separated by a transitional passage which returns at the close to replace the original much longer coda. The third movement embodies even greater contrasts, passing through various moods from the languid barcarolle of the opening *Larghetto* to the central *Vivace* before repeating the sequence in reverse. The *Allegro vivace* finale displays a thematic variety which has been described as operatic, the transitions between the contrasting sections skilfully effected, and ending with a reprise of the first movement coda, this time on a forceful double forte final statement. When the trio was published in 1900, it was dedicated to Count Lurani who had been responsible for employing Wolf-Ferrari as choral director in Milan and its publication several years after its composition may have been to generate some income after his resignation from the position at the time of his sudden departure from Italy in the aftermath of the *Cenerentola* fiasco.

If the Op.5 Trio is indebted to Brahms and Dvorak (the latter in the second and final movements) the Trio in F sharp (Op.7) of 1900/1901 reveals the influence of Cèsar Franck, especially in the monumental first movement which, at double the length of the other two together, totally dominates the work. Its abrupt changes of mood, dramatic silences, disconcerting chromaticism and uncertain tonality is far removed from the formal simplicity of Op.5. Following a massive introduction (equal in length to the entire statement of the themes), it follows conventional sonata form, perhaps more closely than in its predecessor although there is no coda, the movement ending unexpectedly on the reflective final bars of the second theme. The following two movements are inevitably overshadowed by this gigantic musical edifice and seem to belong to another work entirely. In the *Largo*, the cello assumes the dominant role with the violin playing a subordinate contrapuntal or unison role, although it is given the last word in a another surprising ending which seems to break off of mid-phrase. The finale features a lengthy canon, firstly with the cello leading the violin and then piano leading the strings and although tautly constructed avoids academic formality. Taken as a whole, the D major Trio is as curious hybrid encompassing the late romanticism of the present and the graceful romanticism of the past which as it turned out was to characterise Wolf-Ferrari's musical future.

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Piano Quintet · Cello Sonata · Duo

How often has the accepted notion of music in the twentieth century evolved?

For many years the consensus was that the last century was the venue where "progressive" trends and backward-oriented currents, novelty against established order, new vistas against reassuring platitudes clashed. Only to realize that the twentieth century, even more than other musical periods, is actually a mosaic, a complex composite of individual voices; a rich, multifaceted, contradictory picture; it is impossible to summarize it into one or more formulas "che squadrino da ogni lato" (encompassing from each side) such a complex and rich subject.

In the last years the original, personal, unique voice of Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari's (Venice 1876-1948) has been heard again – or maybe just heard, period. One knew, and seldom heard, his operas: especially *I quattro rusteghi* (1906), *Il segreto di Susanna* (1909), *I gioielli della Madonna* (1911), *Il campiello* (1936). These works enjoyed a moderate success at the time of their appearance. They adopted different musical languages (still today *I gioielli* sounds like a surrender to the *verismo* style, which is quite alien to Wolf-Ferrari's personality) and obtained different results; but they show an impressive mastery of musical language and orchestra. Recently we have moved towards a rediscovery and reassessment of this Venetian composer's vocal and instrumental output. These recordings offer revelations – surprising revelations.

Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari, as is obvious from his double family name and family history, was the outcome of two widely cultural and particularly musical traditions. Wolf-Ferrari grew to artistic maturity both in Italy and in Germany. After studying in Rome at the Accademia delle Belle Arti (1891-92), he chose music and spent the most meaningful years of his education in Munich, at the Akademie der Tonkunst (1892-95), working under Josef Rheinberger among others; a wonderful teacher. Who also taught composer Engelbert Humperdinck and conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler. Back in Italy, he moved to Milan where he entered Arrigo Boito's and publisher Giulio Ricordi's artistic circle. Ricordi, however, though he liked the young Venetian and valued him as an artist, chose not to publish his compositions.

The Venetian première of Wolf-Ferrari's opera *Cenerentola* was a resounding flop, so that he resolved to move back to Munich. When his cantata *La vita nuova* had a favourable reception, he went back to Italy and was appointed Director of the Liceo Musicale in Venice, where he remained from 1903 to 1909. Then he decided to devote himself to composition only and went back to Munich again, with frequent trips to Venice.

The *Quintet for strings and piano in D flat major* (1900) belongs to this period. It is not his first essay in the field of chamber music: an unedited *Quartet for strings* and two *Trios for piano, violin and cello* had preceded it: also two short piano pieces. In his career there are not many previous essays in this field, so the skill and mastery of this Quintet are surprising. From a formal point of view it is articulated in the classical and romantic tradition in four movements: certain architectural patterns are reinterpreted with remarkable freedom.

The quintet opens with the marking “tranquillo ed espressivo”, at first in a lilting 6/4 rhythm, and the melody shows an ascending leap of the sixth: the theme of this first movement springs from it. Among other string instruments, the viola has a predominant role here, and this is a distinctive feature. Its cantabile character is one of the most prominent features of this movement; intimate accents alternate with moments when the texture created by piano and strings becomes denser, without losing transparency, and vigorously passionate.

The second movement is a “Canzone”, with the ‘cello pervading the beginning, but also later moments. The melodic line is highly singable but far from simple, and develops along a structure of peculiar intervals. The overall effect is an instrumental ballad, highly dramatic, thanks to a remarkable harmonic articulation.

The basic rhythmical subdivision is crucial in giving structure to the movement: it is a free re-interpretation of the iambic foot in classical poetry (short – unstressed alternating with long – stressed). The third movement, “Capriccio”, is marked by the composer as “Gagliardo e vivace assai”. It follows the “Same tempo of the Canzone” and is a typical *Scherzo con Trio*, also in the iambic metre. Staccato is predominant in it; it is brilliant, fast, light-footed, written in a rich and clever string manner. The general tone reminds one of many of Schubert’s pages.

The fourth and last movement, “Finale. Sostenuto molto” is among the many surprises of this piece. The tonal texture, the close rapports between instruments are apparently strongly reminiscent of Johannes Brahms’s mature chamber music. The pace sounds episodic, but the whole movement is actually ruled by highly consistent and precise harmonic conceptions: it is not just a classical rondeau, not even the rhapsody which one thinks he is hearing. This “Finale” is really the moment where the composer summarizes all tonal, harmonic, rhythmical components, all the different atmospheres of the previous moments. A kind of *summa*, performed with mastery, lightness, astonishment, depth, which goes astray from the road which the listener was expecting to follow.

The years stretching from the *Quintet* (1900) to the outbreak of World War One are some of the richest and most fertile in Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari's output. His attention turned mostly, as usually, to the musical theatre. Then the great crisis came. He was torn between his two affiliations and descents, his heart and mind were Italian and German at the same time. Those two worlds were rushing headlong towards the final and total crash. Our musician chose not to choose, chose to isolate himself. He moved to Switzerland, to Zurich. His creativity suffered enormously. It can be stated that Wolf-Ferrari never completely recovered from that lacerating wound.

Much later, during World War II, the love for chamber music was rekindled; most of these compositions are unedited. In 1945 the *Sonata for cello and piano in G major* in three movements was created. It has been recently printed by a German publisher. The first movement, "Allegro tranquillo", is a lovely lyrical monologue for cello and is characterized by a vast stretch in which the piano is not limited to accompaniment and harmonic support, but suggests many tunes and developments. It is sustained by a constant rhythmic-melodic configuration, with various different intervals. The second movement, "Largo", echoes moments from the first Sonata for 'cello and piano by Brahms; the third one, "Allegro", is a decided come back to the most typical forms and styles of the Romantic tradition.

The *Duo for violin and cello in G minor* from 1946, unedited and never recorded, appears as an uninterrupted exchange of parts and materials, and in no articulation or moment is it ever predictable. The soloists take turns in leading the game and suggesting musical material: the result is a lively, forceful dialogue, full of wit and lightness, apparently casual but ruled by a firm hand; winding its way from G major to G minor in typical late-Romantic fashion.

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English translation by Gina Guandalini

String Quartets & Quintet

Composed in 1894, the **Quartet in A minor for two violins, viola and cello** was dedicated 'to the illustrious Professor Ludwig Abel', a German violinist, composer and conductor. It has been edited by Luca Incerti, based on the manuscript held at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich (Mus. ms. 23144-2). It comprises four movements: *Allegro moderato*, *Adagio non troppo*, *Allegro vivacissimo* and *Allegro assai*.

The composition draws on the Classical and Romantic tradition. The first movement is highly rhythmical. No one instrument overpowers the others: they are all well balanced, with each one showcasing its unique technical and virtuosic features. The work also presents several melodic ideas, supported by an appropriate use of dynamics. In the *Adagio non troppo*, the viola is given a delightful theme to play, with a gentle cello accompaniment. Wolf-Ferrari's melody-writing – anchored in tonality here more than ever – takes centre stage.

The extremely lively and rather abrupt third movement displays various features of 20th-century music, while the brisk, concluding *Allegro* drives forward relentlessly in a fit of enthusiasm and celebration.

The **Quartet in E minor for 2 violins, viola and cello** is split into four movements: *Allegro*, *Andante cantabile*, *Capriccio (Allegro pesante)* and *Allegro*.

Its date of composition is unknown, but it certainly stems from Wolf-Ferrari's later years, when all the composer's unique artistic traits came to the fore. Dynamics are central to the first movement (*Allegro*), from the very first bars. Various instructions are provided: *pianissimo, piano*, *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, eventually reaching *mezzo forte* and then *forte* at the *Con fuoco*. There are also several tempo changes – *Animato*, *Andante tranquillo*, *Allegro*, *Andante* – alternating between technically challenging moments and wonderfully melodic sections and producing a captivating atmosphere imbued with meaning. The four instruments are nicely balanced throughout.

The theme of the *Andante cantabile* is announced by the first violin, based on a 19th-century-inspired melody of a vaguely Romantic nature.

The *Capriccio* has a spontaneous and whimsical character, with several contrapuntal sections. Here too, the tempo is constantly shifting: *Allegro pesante*, *Andante cantabile*, *Allegro*, *Scherzando*, *Andante*, all underpinned by a flawless structure.

The final movement (*Allegro*) is lively and in step with the composer's typical style.

As this quartet makes clear, in the context of the early 20th-century avant-garde, Wolf-Ferrari provided an alluring return to Classicism, but it was his own personal interpretation of the style, rather than an attempt to restore it.

His neoclassicism appears more modern today than it would have done to his contemporaries.

The **Quintet in C Op.24 for two violins, two violas and cello** was edited by Luca Incerti, based on the individual parts published by Musikverlag Thomi-Berg. This quintet, probably the only one Wolf-Ferrari wrote for this ensemble apart from his youthful *Quintetto per archi* (1894), was written in 1942, and therefore belongs to the composer's mature period. It has four movements: *Allegro assai quasi presto*, *Larghetto*, *Prestissimo*, and *Molto mosso alla breve*.

The first movement is in 3/4 and in sonata form: its thematic material is wonderfully inspired from the very first bars. The colourful variety in dynamics is never an end unto itself: they help to conjure up a special intimate and lyrical atmosphere. The *Larghetto*, in G major, is in 6/8. It opens with the second viola, which is joined by the first viola in the second bar, just before the first violin introduces the theme. The five instruments sometimes play alternately and sometimes together, creating a sublime sound. An eloquent *Poco più mosso* follows: a wonderful movement that shines a light on Wolf-Ferrari's character. The third movement (*Prestissimo*) is highly virtuosic and requires extraordinary technical ability from the performers. Towards the end, the tempo changes (*Adagio molto*) and an alluring melodic line enters that is the complete opposite of the technical passages preceding it. The final movement, *Molto mosso alla breve,* is lively, interesting and effective.

Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari's writing for strings displays expert compositional technique and a thorough technical knowledge of the instruments. He treats each instrument in the most practical way, never seeking to go beyond its limits to achieve special timbral effects. Instead he takes advantage of the natural differences between them, always choosing the right textures and registers for his musical discourse, even in the most virtuosic and technically challenging passages.

Wolf-Ferrari's developmental style is clearly apparent on all the compositions on the two CDs. His technical and virtuosic writing, lyricism and passion, intelligent harmonic language and delicate phrasing all stand out, and confirm his status as a musician worthy of the utmost respect, with much yet to rediscover.

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Translation: Ian Mansbridge

String Trios

Composed in Munich in January 1894, and edited by Luca Incerti, based on the manuscript held at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich (Mus. ms. 21366).

The **Trio in B minor for violin, viola and cello** is divided into three movements: *Allegro*, *Larghetto* and *Scherzo (Allegro vivace)*.

The first movement in 3/4 is quite quick, and is difficult to pigeon-hole as belonging to any particular style. It does not have much emotional depth, but reflects the musician's youthful personality, producing an original sound with its powerful use of colour. Crescendos and diminuendos are used continuously to move from *piano* to *pianissimo* and from *forte* to *fortissimo* and all the stages in between.

The *Larghetto* is highly expressive, with a pace that feels simultaneously slow and fast, revealing a delicate inner emotional world. However, things change suddenly with a remarkable *Più mosso*, which leads to a *Più vivo* before returning to the *Tempo primo*, creating a highly evocative and evolving atmosphere. Various parts were added to this movement at a later date, marked '*ossia*', which could imply the use of a second violin, second viola and second cello; this would later become his *Sextet*.

The final movement, *Scherzo: Allegro vivace*, is in 3/4 with a lively and celebratory feel, full of effervescent technical passages but with no shortage of lyrical and melodic ideas. It is in ternary form (ABA), incorporating a *Trio: Presto non troppo* that is to be played delicately and *pianissimo* throughout, followed by a *Coda*. It is not unusual in Wolf-Ferrari's compositions for a single movement to contain unexpected shifts in performance style.

Like the Trio in B minor, the **Trio in C minor for violin, viola and cello** was also edited by Luca Incerti based on the manuscript held at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich (Mus. ms. 23142–1).

There are only two new movements – the third (*Scherzo: Allegro molto*) and the fourth (*Adagio molto*) – since the first two (*Allegro* and *Larghetto*) are the same as the *Trio in B minor* (the only exception, of course, being the key of the first movement, which changes from B to C minor).

As well as quotations in a Classical style, the *Scherzo: Allegro molto* also shows off Wolf-Ferrari's personality and harmonic sensitivity: peaceful, rustic, magical and radiant. This is juxtaposed with the *Trio* at the centre of the movement, which has a *cantabile* style that produces an absorbing contrast with the initial section.

The final movement (*Adagio molto*) begins with a highly melancholic *pianissimo* lament, followed by a *Fuga Allegro molto*, evoking Bach in certain places. The opening theme passes from the violin to the viola and then the cello, and the composer's polyphony is flawless, testament to his studies at the conservatoire. A very lively *Più allegro* comes next, which adds an original touch to the movement, before the concluding *Tempo I*.

Wolf-Ferrari's music may seem 'academic' at first glance, but this impression vanishes once one appreciates how the musician expresses himself through his 'forms', revealing his sometimes-aristocratic spirit and more intimate interior aspects. Certain passages seem to reveal heartfelt anguish at the catastrophic effects of the war. The **Trio in A minor Op.32 for violin, viola and cello** is divided into three movements: *Allegro moderato*, *Pastorale (Andante tranquillo)* and *Allegro*, and was written in 1945, during the composer's mature period. The *Trio* opens with an agitated first theme, introduced by the cello and picked up by the violin, followed by an emotional second theme in the form of a chorale. A calmer atmosphere enters at the marking *In tempo, tranquillo*, but the agitation returns with the instruction *In tempo, con fuoco*. An *Adagio molto* rounds off the movement, where, amidst constant changes of heart, the dark atmosphere escalates with dramatic tremolos in the three instruments. The second movement, in a major key, has a pastoral character, with a gently rocking 6/8 barcarolle rhythm. The final movement is again frantic, and returns to the second chorale theme from the first movement, before the three instruments round off the work with a return to the oppressive tremolos.
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Translation: Ian Mansbridge

Piano Music
Wolf-Ferrari was both cosmopolitan and adventurous and in 1910 he travelled to the United States. At the onset of the First World War, he was living in neutral Zurich. For him, the severing of Italian-German unity resulted in a dramatic creative silence that lasted for seven years. A controversial episode in his biography is the Chair of Composition at the Mozarteum of Salzburg in 1939, during full Nazism. As in the case of other artists, the fact that Wolf-Ferrari had found work in Austro-German territory and that he had worked for some years under Hitler's regime affected his posthumous reputation. Unfortunately, the circumstances in which the composer found himself and the choices he made have influenced our judgment of this artist who was full of charm and authentic inspiration. Although in large part forgotten and undervalued after the War, when the School of Darmstadt refused composers anchored to tradition, Wolf- Ferrari has slowly been rediscovered. In fact, his work has been re-evaluated as a radically advanced 19th century alternative and in reality his position is not conservative: He shows a trust in the existence of timeless beauty, independent from all the "ism's" and from every technical character. "To follow the rules doesn't guarantee beauty but neither does to not follow them": if we think of the Wagnerian *Meistersinger*, Wolf- Ferrari is halfway between the instinctive liberty of Walther von der Vogelweide and strict adhesion to the rules of Beckmesser. To free oneself from the rules, one must know them. If on one side one fights against "sanculotti dell'arte", on the other he fights against the imitators, affirming that to try to mimic Debussy or Stravinsky is artistic suicide. His essentially optimistic point of view is affirmed in the following: "I don't believe that it is

worth it to fight too much against music that is not such, It should be important to open the way to beautiful music, first in the hearts of the young and then in that of the public, opening wide the Theatres". At the same time, he lived in a kind of artistic solitude and believed that "The communion between artists is purely practical…so groups of artists are impossible to establish."

Indeed, based on the composer's work it seems evident that although he was often inspired by 17th century and Venetian aesthetics, he established the musical rules that make his language totally personal. In this totality and in the wish to avoid seeming like anyone else and following any pre-established current, he found that "communion with all" which, according to him, should be the highest goal of an artist. One talks of rules that are born but in an instinctive way as "in Art, sentiment decides, not reason". The new 17th Century character of the music of Wolf-Ferrari has often been misunderstood: Mozart and Goldoni do not become the pretext for a manieristic nostalgy, but constitute the emblems of a lived classism like *Zeitloss*, "lost in time", that is like an absolute dimension. Although Wolf-Ferrari's life was characterized by conflict and anguish, his music aimed to recompose the inharmonious aspects of the world without hiding them.
In his pieces for piano, perhaps more than in his theatrical production, we can guess that behind the predisposition towards comedy there is always a fine line of melancholy and a *Sehnsucht* that arrives at the nucleus of the purest German romanticism. Many of the unedited recorded compositions, as well as the Bagatelle, which alternates moments of playful lightness with bursts of lyricism, were discovered by Costantino Catena at the Staatsbibliothek in Munich. Notwithstanding the title, we are closer to the world of Brahms' *Klavierstücke* than to that of Beethoven's *Bagatelle*. There is also a certain theatricality in Wolf-Ferrari's piano pieces, not only in their realistic comicality but in their writing, which is charaterized by continuous contrasts in which the pauses and the repeated gests of fracture purposely disturb the serene flow of the discourse. The first of these *Bagatelle*, which was unfinished, was also re-constructed by Catena based on a sketch left by the composer. The theatricality of these pieces is evident in different ways, also in the unstable mood of the *Variation on the theme on the Minuetto del Falstaff* (June 1896) and in the unpredictable rhythmic games of the *Scherzino* (1920) and in the very lyric *Chopin-Phantasie* (December 1896), which came together nearly fifty years later in the Third Movement of the *Violin Concerto Op.26*. Instead, the three *Impromptus Op.13* (1904) and three *Klavierstücke Op.14* (1905) were published; the titles recall the nature of the romantic mould, but once again the composer moves away from the form in a personal authentic manner. The *Andante* that opens the *Impromptus* shows us the strong sense of climax that is deeply rooted in Wolf- Ferrari's work with a progressive amplification (dynamic and rhythmic) that ends in a whirling trill followed by a "fortissimo" full of feeling. Some details seem to recall a certain floral liberty style, but the use of silence and "piano subito" dismisses any suspicion of easy hedonism.

Tranquillo e Rubato, the second *Impromptu*, is at the same time elegant and full of pathos. The use of syncopation reminds us of Brahms and the precious harmony of another Wolf, i.e., Hugo, but again the inspiration seems personal and created by tremule and moments of metaphysical restlessness. The sweetness and sentiment do not translate into decorative mannerisms or affected sentimentalism. The last *Impromptu* can be characterized as passionate. Indeed, we fully perceive the double identity of the author: on one side, references to late German Romanticism and on the other a Mediterraneanism that in the *Largamente* seems to take breath from the sea.

The triptych of Op.14 moves between delicate thoughtfulness, strong passion and playfulness (moves from delicte thoughtfulness, to strong passion and playfulness.). The first piece, *Andante*, opens with pastel tints and with philosophical thought that reminds one of the composer's love of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Unlike what happens in the *Impromptus*, here paradoxically there is a glimmer of Chopinism and touches of late Baroque. As always, Wolf- Ferrari finds his originality in a confined dimension, between different worlds which in literature could be compared to authors like Umberto Saba and Italo Svevo. In common with them, the middle European Wolf -Ferrari also has an ironic vein, which is evident in the second piece, the *Capriccio*. In any case, we are far from the sarcasm of Prokofiev as the parody is constantly surrounded by a halo of shining tenderness.

We return to lyricism with the last piece, *Romanza (Andante Cantabile)*, which is a sort of instrumental Lied that seems to sink its roots in a popular timeless universe.

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Translation by Marylou Grey and Claire Montagna

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